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Abstract: Mike Latting was born on August 15, 1952 in Harvey, Illinois, and grew up on his family's farm. Mike lives in Pembroke Township of Kankakee County, Illinois and operates the Pembroke Rodeo, a nationally sanctioned rodeo event held annually. Latting is also a rodeo promoter, supplying animals and equipment to rodeos throughout the United States. He lives with his family on his 60 acre property breeding horses and other livestock, including bulls and calves for roping. Latting defines himself as a rancher, not a farmer. He grows no crops for his family, livestock or for marketing locally. All of his feed is purchased and mixed locally. Latting discusses his biographical history as well as the layout of his land, his care and uses for his horses and livestock, and the history of the Pembroke Rodeo. He first began the rodeo in 1976, and has been the principal proprietor ever since.

Keywords: Pembroke Rodeo; breeding, raising and care of rodeo livestock; bucking horses; livestock genetics; Pemborke Township, Kankakee County, Illinois; African American farmers in Illinois; growing up on the farm; leasing and renting farmland; land maintenance

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Interview with Michael Latting

ALPLM_29_LattingMik

July 28, 2008

Interviewer: Elizabeth Simmons

Simmons: My name is Elizabeth Simmons. Today is July 28th and it's 2008. I am at Pembroke Township in the home of Mr. Michael Latting. That's in Kankakee County, Illinois. This interview is being conducted as part of the Illinois State Museum's Oral History of Illinois Agriculture project. Hello, Mr. Latting, how are you?

Latting: Pretty good, and how are you?

Simmons: Great. I'm fine, thank you. When we get started here, before we look more at your farm and business, I'd like to ask you a few questions so we can get a little idea about your background. If you don't mind, can you say who your mother was or is and who your father is?

Latting: My mother is Harriet Latting and my dad is Thorough Latting.

Simmons: Your mother's maiden name was...

Latting: Brown.

Simmons: Brown. Thank you. How did your family come to settle in Illinois originally?

Latting: Well, I don't know how far back I can go with that. I do know that both my parents were born in Illinois. My granddad ultimately bought this place that we're sitting on right now back when I was a kid.

Simmons: OK. Your presence in Pembroke Township has been about how long, would you say?

Latting: I personally have been here thirty-two years.

Simmons: And your grandfather?

Latting: He was here about ten or fifteen years before me.

Simmons: Do you have brothers and sisters in your immediate family?

Latting: I have a sister; her name is Tracy.

Simmons: Where does she live?

Latting: She lives in Robbins, Illinois.

Simmons: Is that south of here?

Latting: It's north. It's north of here. It's one of the suburbs of Chicago.

Simmons: Oh, OK. Thank you. When you were growing up, did you spend most of your time out in the Chicago area, or were you out here with your grandfather?

Latting: Pretty much so. I didn't spend a lot of time out here, actually, until I got out of college.

Simmons: Did your grandfather have a structure where he could stay when he was out here?

Latting: Well, when he first came here he had a little travel trailer that he had up by the barn.

Simmons: That travel trailer was that a place that you'd go with him occasionally if he was out here on the land and you'd stay with him there, too?

Latting: I came up once originally with him when I was real little. But it was a little bit too rural for me at the time, I guess. I didn't really come back this way until 1976, which was the year I graduated from college.

Simmons: About what time period would it be that you're recalling, that you were a small child and your grandfather brought you here?

Latting: Oh, I'm going to say probably in the mid-sixties.

Simmons: Mid-sixties. OK. Since you spent most of your time with your family in the city, were there particular chores or other responsibilities that you had around the house?

Latting: Actually, we had horses even in Robbins.

Simmons: Oh, you had horses in Robbins?

Latting: That's correct. One of the things that we did was that after we got home from school, we needed to practice, but every day we needed to do chores.

Simmons: OK. What type of chores, for example, did you do growing up?

Latting: Yu had to feed the hay and grain to the horses every day and make sure they had water. You had to help clean the stalls. You know, just traditional kinds of things.

Simmons: So pretty much you've always been around horses since you were a boy, then?

Latting: Oh, certainly. Certainly.

Simmons: What was your favorite subject in school?

Latting: You know, I really don't know. Being an educator, you know, that's kind of an odd question for me. I don't know. I'm going to say that I think the class that I enjoyed the most in high school was geometry.

Simmons: You liked geometry.

Latting: Yeah.

Simmons: Why?

Latting: I'm not sure I liked geometry as much as though I appreciated it. I think I learned a lot from the instructor.

Simmons: I see. What was the thing that particularly attracted you the most about geometry?

Latting: I think it was really learning to think on your feet. I think that was what it was all about.

Simmons: OK. Did your family have gatherings that they would get together routinely? Were they here out in Pembroke or were they in the city for the Christmas holidays or Fourth of July?

Latting: We've always had a close family. Usually, for each one of the holidays, we'd meet at one of the grandparents' or parents' home.

Simmons: The extended Latting family—how many people would that have been?

Latting: My sister and I. There was another sister, originally, who died when she was in her thirties. She had sickle-cell.

Simmons: Oh, I see. That's too bad.

Latting: She passed when she was in her thirties. Prior to that, I'm the oldest grandchild. All the other cousins and things were younger than me.

Simmons: Would you say there were—what? Ten or twenty of you?

Latting: Oh, no. I'd say there's probably six, maybe, total.

Simmons: Six of you.

Latting: Yeah.

Simmons: Where are the majority of your kin living at this point?

Latting: Pretty much in South Chicago suburbs.

Simmons: South Chicago.

Latting: Yeah.

Simmons: Did your family come from somewhere prior to living in Chicago?

Latting: My mother is originally from Chicago and my dad is too.

Simmons: OK. All right. When you were younger, and up to this time, do you have any particular interests or activities or hobbies that were perhaps maybe not quite directly related with horses?

Latting: I can't think of anything.

Simmons: (laughter)

Latting: I think it's always been about horses.

Simmons: So you've been a horse man as long as you can think of.

Latting: As long as I can remember.

Simmons: OK. When you graduated from high school, what did you do then?

Latting: I was fortunate enough to get a rodeo scholarship. I went to school in Casper, Wyoming.

Simmons: Can you tell me a little bit about that rodeo scholarship?

Latting: Out West, they have situations just like they do with football or basketball in our area. You could go to school just like you get to go to school on a football scholarship but only on a rodeo scholarship.

Simmons: I see.

Latting: That's what kind of got me out West.

Simmons: This was in Casper, Wyoming?

Latting: That's correct.

Simmons: What was the name of the school that you attended after high school?

Latting: It was Casper Junior College.

Simmons: OK. When you finished at Casper Junior College, did you go somewhere after that?

Latting: I went to the University of Southern Colorado in Pueblo.

Simmons: OK. And what did you study at Southern Colorado?

Latting: I was a physical education major.

Simmons: OK. Did you continue riding and competing in rodeo at that point?

Latting: Oh, certainly, yes.

Simmons: When was the first time that you started competing in rodeo? Was that in high school, or younger?

Latting: When I was younger. Actually, I started riding bulls when I was twelve years old.

Simmons: What was your first time riding a bull? How long do you suppose you stayed up?

Latting: I don't know. I'd rather refer to (inaudible) I was supposed to get. I probably got about six seconds. I didn't make the qualified ride, though, the first time.

Simmons: What is the time to qualify?

Latting: Eight seconds.

Simmons: Eight seconds?

Latting: Yes.

Simmons: Is it graduated depending on the age of the rider?

Latting: No, it's eight seconds, period.

Simmons: OK. We're here today, of course, in part because you run the Pembroke Rodeo. If I understand correctly, that's a rodeo promotion company? You provide bulls and animals and other things related to rodeos?

Latting: That's correct.

Simmons: OK. So you've always been involved in horses and even since you were young in the rodeo? Is that correct?

Latting: That's right.

Simmons: What was it like for you—finding a career after college? You had all these great experiences with horses and then you also had a degree in physical education. What was your career like?

Latting: To be honest with you, back in the early seventies when I got out of college, I could make more money rodeoing than I could teaching school. Part of the problem, as I saw it, was: "Why should I teach school when I can rodeo and make more money?" My mom didn't see it quite that way because I was the first child and the first one to graduate from college. She thought that it was important that I do something with my degree. So quite naturally, if that's what Mom wants, that's pretty much what you're going to do.

M1: Let's just pause a moment... and one hand (inaudible). We're back in business.

Latting: Speaking of career choices, when I got out of college, my mom thought it would be really important for me to pursue a career in my degree area. So I applied to a few schools and unfortunately one of them called me. Quite naturally then I had to go to work at the school. But it was really a good thing in that… hindsight's always 20/20 and mothers always know best as do fathers. But I realize now that rodeo was really not what I was supposed to be doing. Part of what I was supposed to be doing was motivating and changing kids' lives. I think that's really what I was put here for. But I was given a tool to use to help get children to where they wanted to pay attention and to have something in common.

Simmons: You were very fortunate—we talked before—to have a different sort of education than a lot of people have. When you were growing up in Chicago, you told me that you went to private schools?

Latting: Yes, I went to St. Benedict grade school and from there I went to Marist High School.

Simmons: And what group operates Marist High School?

Latting: I can't tell you now. It's been *x* amount of years ago since I've been there. You know, I'm not sure.

Simmons: Is it a religious school?

Latting: Oh, it most certainly is. It's a Catholic school. I was thinking of what order of brothers.

Simmons: Oh. (laughter)

Latting: Is the reason that I hesitated on that answer. I really couldn't tell you now.

Simmons: Yeah. How do you feel your education affected your final career choices and what effect did that education have on you?

Latting: I'm not really sure to be honest with you. I think some things just happen because they're supposed to happen. Did I start a long time ago saying that I wanted to be a teacher? No. Did I say a long time ago that I wanted to be a principal? No. But I knew that I was a people person and that whatever I could do to help people was kind of what I wanted to do. And so that kind of put both things together. We started a lot of kids riding horses in this area. We parlayed that into helping kids into and out of school. It's just kind of a thing that I fell into that was a fit for me.

Simmons: You would say that you feel that in a lot of ways your education influenced your successes?

Latting: Oh, certainly. Certainly. It opened up doors that would probably have never been opened.

Simmons: All right. Now just changing gears a little bit. I've asked you a few questions that were more family-oriented questions. I was kind of curious as to how you met your wife.

Latting: She happened to live next door to me and it was kind of hard not to meet her. I came out of the house. I looked over next door and I said, "Wow." That's kind of where it started.

Simmons: So there was this very pretty young girl in your neighborhood.

Latting: Exactly right.

Simmons: Let's talk a little bit about where you grew up in Chicago. You mentioned that you grew up in the city but you didn't say where.

Latting: Actually Robbins is not in the city.

Simmons: Oh, I'm sorry. I'll take that out.

Latting: It's outside of the city. I grew up in Robbins, Illinois.

Simmons: OK. Robbins is a suburb outside of the city. When you were younger you still had horses there in that area?

Latting: Correct, correct.

Simmons: So she lived in your neighborhood in Robbins?

Latting: Uh-huh.

Simmons: What are some of the memories that you have about living and growing up in Robbins?

Latting: I really had a good childhood. You know, both of my parents were there, and it was kind of the way I thought the rest of the world was supposed to be at the time to be honest with you. I can't think of any negative in any area of it.

Simmons: What was your favorite memory of growing up in Robbins?

Latting: Oh, boy. You know, I really don't know. I really don't know if I have a favorite. Actually, I can't think of anything negative at all. All of my family was there; my grandparents lived two houses down from us in between (inaudible) lived in between my house and my grandparents' house. Her relatives lived on the other side of us. It's just kind of like a big big family.

Simmons: You would say that that was probably your favorite memory—living with the big big family?

Latting: I would imagine so.

Simmons: Yeah. OK. Moving on a little bit after that, you dated for awhile, I presume. At what point did you realize that you and Nina wanted to get married?

Latting: She told me it was time to get married and I said OK. (laughter)

Simmons: (laughter) About how long was that after you all started dating?

Latting: I got out of college. She always said, "I will never marry a bum, so you're going to have to have a job before we get married here." Again, I was making more money riding bucking horses but it wasn't a quote-unquote job. When I started out down at the local grade school, then she figured it was time.

Simmons: I see. Once you got your job and you settled in from riding rodeo, then she thought you could get married.

Latting: Actually, I continued to rodeo after I started working also. I quit riding bucking horses when I turned thirty and I think I was twenty-five when we got married. There were five years there that I was working and competing also.

Simmons: I see. OK. How about some final thoughts here? What do you think is the most significant and transforming change in your rodeo days or things that have happened to you related to rodeo during your lifetime?

Latting: I think that the audience has gotten larger. I know that the purses have increased. I think the caliber of the livestock is better. This may sound like a little bit of a prejudiced statement from me, but I'm not sure if the young boys are as tough as they used to be.

Simmons: How do you mean that?

Latting: You hear coaches saying things like that when they're talking about the athletes that are... I may be sounding prejudiced when I say this, but there was a time when I was young where you felt no pain. I don't care if your leg was hanging over on the other side of the fence. You were expected to be a certain way: you had to be a man, you had to step up, and you had to do this. Now, if things aren't particularly right, these kids will get off. But I guess it turns into more of an economic situation too because the prize money is so much higher. They can't afford to be hurt because then they can't compete tomorrow. That kind of sets the tone for some of those things also.

Simmons: I see. So their concern for their own physical well being, in your view, prevents them from perhaps being a little more aggressive when they compete.

Latting: Yes and no. There may be better rodeo athletes today. I'm not sure if they're better cowboys today. But when I say rodeo athletes—specialists in their events—I think they're probably better today. But I'm not sure if I see as much second effort as what we used to see in the old days.

Simmons: I see.

Latting: The young kids would probably disagree with me but I think anybody my age or older would probably agree with me. I think it's a thing that comes with time. I'm sure this generation of kids will say in the next round, "Well, you know, back in the day when I used to..." That's something that just goes on and on, I guess.

Simmons: Yeah. How do you feel about changes in technology and communications and things like that? How do you feel that that's affected farm life and your business of rodeo promoting?

Latting: I've found that it's the best thing since sliced bread. Technology in any endeavor, in any situation is the wave of the future. It's the way things are happening, you know? Ten years ago, people had pagers. They didn't have cell phones. Today, how do you make it without a cell phone? That's a part of technology. As life evolves and technology gets better and increases, I think it provides a better form of life.

Simmons: For your business specifically, do you think that makes you have a better or closer relationship with your clients or with customers who contact you for rodeo promotion?

Latting: Oh, certainly, certainly. I mean, you can be reached at any time. You can get any type of information that you like just at the click of a button.

Simmons: So you feel like actually it's a big boon to your business because you can keep in much closer contact with your clients?

Latting: Exactly right.

Simmons: I see. What do you see for the future of farming and living in a small community like this and how does that relate back to what you were saying about that the young boys aren't maybe as tough for rodeo?

Latting: When you speak of farming, technically I'm not a farmer. We're in the rodeo business, and we have... Where farming really touches me is the cost of fuel and the cost of grain that I have to take care of to feed my livestock. I'm hoping something gets better there, to be honest with you, because feed has really gotten high. Some changes that I expect to see is just—you know, I think we're in the greatest country in the world. I know we're in the greatest country in the

world. I think that anything that we've ever faced, we've always gotten by it. I'm expecting things to probably turn around and get better. I'm sure that as time has evolved there are people sitting right here where I'm sitting now saying, "Oh, you know, this is the worst it's ever been." As time went on things got better and moved on.

Simmons: You would say that the future for your rodeo business is just in expansion and hopefully there'll be some sort of leveling off of your expenses and your inputs?

Latting: I don't think it's going to level off because things are going to continue to get high. But I think everything will continue to get better. Because if this raises, this has got to raise also.

Simmons: Have you seen, because of the higher costs of fuel and other things, your costs increase and therefore your clients have had to absorb those extra costs or how have you managed this?

Latting: Yeah. It's got to be spread out somewhere. You know, the boat's got to stay even. You try to keep the cost down as much as you possibly can and you hope that the other side stays down as much as it can. But, like with fuel this year, it's been a little tough, because my contracts were signed last year. So you just have to eat that extra expense.

Simmons: Yeah. So you do share some things in common with more traditional farmers…

Latting: Exactly.

Simmons: …in terms of those expenses that you have. The fixed expenses.

Latting: Right.

Simmons: What advice would you give to someone thinking of pursuing a career in stock breeding or in rodeo promotion?

Latting: I think it's a passion, first off. I think you have to be passionate about it. I think you need to do a lot of research in how you want to breed livestock to make sure that you're breeding the right way. Trial and error is no longer necessary with all the books and all the technology that we spoke of earlier. Because you need to set things up so that you're breeding the way to get the result that you want. In the old days you bred, and if one came out right, you'd try to keep breeding that way. But now you don't have to do that. There are animals that you can put in place that… Now you can buy semen. Now you don't even have to own the bull. You can buy semen. There are a lot of good things that have come along the line.

Simmons: So as they say in ag, you can buy the genetics…

Latting: Exactly.

Simmons: …and you don't have to actually have the animal on site, on your property.

Latting: That's correct.

Simmons: What types of things along the way have you picked up and learned that's actually spurred your interest in genetics?

Latting: This is something that my dad told me a long time ago and it took me awhile to get it figured out but it makes all the sense in the world. In breeding the horses that we breed, we've figured out that the mare is everything. People want you to think that the dad is the big deal but my animals get their characteristics from the mom. I'm a firm believer that you can take a great mare and breed her to a goat and get an outstanding horse.

Simmons: I see. OK. Where you don't actually have to have the animal standing at stud—what part in breeding and different types of genetics as you've already mentioned has that played in your breeding program?

Latting: No, actually, I own my own stud.

Simmons: OK.

Latting: The stud I'm using right now—Mandan—he's probably about fifteen years old. But I've got another stud right now that's a long yearling that I'll use to replace him when he gets too old. What happens is that you have to make sure and change your stud out on occasion because you don't want to start inbreeding. Most of the mares that I have on site now are all Mandan's daughters. I've got four or five mares left that aren't his actual offspring. When I get to the point where I need to start breeding his daughters, then I've got another stud that will be ready in another year or two.

Simmons: OK. Mandan is your stallion that you're currently using right now?

Latting: That's correct.

Simmons: Then all his daughters are your breeding stock mares?

Latting: Right.

Simmons: OK. Can you clarify for me again—the stallion that you're going to replace him with is the offspring of who?

Latting: His dad belonged to a friend of mine that lives in Iowa and his mother is one of my mares that, again, is not one of Mandan's daughters.

Latting: OK, I see. Very interesting. OK. Finally, what advice or wisdom would you like to give to future generations just in general, about living the farm life and with rodeo and the other things we've talked about just now?

Latting: I would need to go a little broader than that because I think that life is life, period. I think that a person should be happy. Whatever you want to pursue, pursue it with all you've got. When you get up in the morning, understand that you're going to give everything that you have to be successful in whatever you're planning on doing. That's whether you live in a rural area or in downtown Chicago. I don't think it really matters. But I think you need to try as hard as you possibly can to be the best that you can possibly be.

Simmons: That's what you would like to have people most know, then.

Latting: That's what I tell all my kids.

Simmons: OK, very good. All right. I appreciated talking with you about your basic family and your background and things we just might not have known about you had we not asked.

Latting: The pleasure's mine.

Simmons: Thank you.

(end of audio file #1)

Simmons: Here we are in Pembroke Township with Mike Latting. We're here in Pembroke Township, Kankakee County, Illinois with Mr. Mike Latting. He runs the Pembroke Rodeo. He's a

promoter and also he's an educator. Mike, I notice behind me you've got some bulls back there. What kind are they?

Latting: They're all cross-bred rodeo bulls. Quite a few of them have probably seven-eighths Brahman in them and then they all have different types of breeding in them also.

Simmons: Where do you get that Brahman genetics from that you can breed bulls like that? Doesn't that come from India?

Latting: The true Brahman bull came here from India but it's been cross-bred so much over here in the States. But these bulls are all out of southeastern Oklahoma. They're down pretty close to the Texas line.

Simmons: Do you have a bull-breeding program now that you've got the initial stock?

Latting: Actually, I don't breed bulls; I breed horses. I've got some friends down there in Oklahoma that breed bulls. They can have it. They've got more room, more ground and more grass. Out here on the sand dunes, we're kind of short on pasture. I need all the pasture I can get for my horses.

Simmons: I'm looking at your bulls and it's not too hot out today. But, of course, it's an evening in July. They look like they're pretty calm out there. I have a hard time believing that they can get all heated up and start bucking. How does that work with those bulls?

Latting: These bulls are pretty much athletes. You'll notice that they're all kind of built a little bit of the same. They're not like beef bulls. They kind of pork around. All of these bulls are pretty athletic-looking. They move it, which means they can jump high. They're light on their feet, they can turn fast and that's what you look for in rodeo buck-and-move.

Simmons: I notice that the bulls are generally—is this typical? Are they generally not castrated when they use them for bucking?

Latting: Yes, that's why they're bulls. They'd be steers if they were castrated.

Simmons: What effect does that have on their use or value for rodeo stock?

Latting: The fact of them being castrated has absolutely no effect as long as they perform. As long as they're athletic and as long as they buck. I've bucked big steers that people thought had not been castrated. But you run five hundred through a chute and you miss one or you run all your bulls through and somebody accidentally castrated one. It really doesn't matter when they get to be big bulls. If they buck, they buck. If they're going to buck, they'll buck.

Simmons: The effect on their ability to buck isn't necessarily affected by whether they're castrated or not?

Latting: No, no.

Simmons: It's on the individual performer.

Latting: Exactly, exactly. One thing about those bulls not being castrated, though, is a lot of times they're a little meaner. They're a little harder to handle sometimes. Because they are.

Simmons: I notice all the bulls are horned. For us rodeo novices, is that a pretty typical way that the bulls will come—with horns?

Latting: All bulls originally came with horns. Horns were bred out of them because of man. Back in the old days, that's what they used for preservation to keep the wolves and bobcats off them.

Simmons: How does that affect the rodeo human performer—the cowboy—when he encounters a bull and it's bucking? If he falls off eventually and it's got horns?

Latting: That's what you've got bullfighters for. Their job is to jump in between the guy and the bull and lead the bull off away from the contestant. Of course, sometimes the bull would get to you first. It's just kind of like getting beaten across the head with a baseball bat. Those horns are pretty solid.

Simmons: Can you lead us rodeo novices through a typical bull ride? Just the nuts and bolts of what would happen in a typical ride from your experience?

Latting: We'll load the bull into a chute and they'll walk into a chute. You'll close the chute. It's already closed in front of them and you'll close it behind them when they walk in. The rider will put his rope around the bull and then he'll climb over in there with him. The rope pulls up on one side—he'll have one of his buddies pull the rope up tight. Then he'll run the rope across his hand and wrap it around his hand and then close his hand. Then he'll slide up as close as he can to that rope and tell them to open up the gate. When they open up the gate, it's on.

Simmons: Does the bull automatically know to start bucking or is it because of something that the rider does?

Latting: What happens is that animals are used to not having anything on their back, OK? The reason that you only ride it for eight seconds is that that's when the animal performs the best. If you rode one until he stopped every time after awhile they'd get to say, "Well, it's OK, I don't have to… I'll just walk around." Any animal that has not been domesticated doesn't want anything on their back because that's a form of threat. That's a threat. Animals would jump on their back to take them down; you see on National Geographic all the time, the lions grabbing the zebra. I think that's one of the most famous commercials. But you notice when a lion's on a zebra, the zebra's bucking and kicking and trying to get him off. This is the same concept. Except usually when they buck the cowboy off, they turn around to get him.

Simmons: That's when the helpers come in and they help get the bull away from the cowboy.

Latting: Correct. Correct.

Simmons: I would imagine rodeo's a pretty dangerous sport. How often have you been injured in your rodeo career and what kind of injuries did you have? You look like you're walking and talking and pretty OK.

Latting: I'm pretty fortunate, I guess. I broke both bones in my left arm once. I tore the ligaments in my right knee—both of them. I crushed a nerve in my right knee. I got my ear about cut off once. I cracked my heel once. I think that's about it.

Simmons: In terms of the average bucking bull-rider, would you say that you've been fortunate or about average or...?

Latting: Pretty fortunate. There are boys who have been beaten up pretty good.

Simmons: This is really interesting. I really can say for the rodeo novice that most of us don't know much about behind the scenes for riding a bucking bull. So thank you for letting us know. I'd like to move on here a little bit and talk about your land in general. How much land does it require for

a person to operate a rodeo promotion company? I see you have… It looks like pastures and of course you've got your bulls and horses.

Latting: Right.

Simmons: Can you talk a little bit about that?

Latting: Sure. There are thirty-five acres on this plot right here and there are another sixty-five over about a mile on the other side. We've got horses running over there on that pasture. We've got some feedlot cattle over there. I keep my bulls contained here because I want them on grain and hay every day. I don't want them on grass; I want to know exactly what I'm getting into. I've got to have them strong; I've got to have them just like an athlete. So rather than grazing, I want protein in them. I want them to have protein. These bulls are on alfalfa and grain every day. The same with my horses. They're on grass in the back but I want to make sure that they're on grain and alfalfa every day also.

Simmons: In terms of the layout and the arrangement of your farmstead here, you've got your immediate bulls here, because it lets you keep an eye on them and feed them and really take good care of them. Then the animals that are perhaps not as critical, they're out on grass?

Latting: Correct. Correct.

Simmons: OK. I see you've got some pastures farther out back. Is there any particular decision you make as to what animals are kept right here on the closest property to your house here, beyond the bulls, and what are in your other pasture?

Latting: The bulls, mostly, actually I want them as close to the house as possible because I want to make sure they're there when I get up and they're there when I leave. That's really important because I don't need one of the bulls walking down the road or something. I keep the bucking horses in the back and they can go back around about twenty acres. I've got some yearlings that I keep a little closer than them so I can kind of keep an eye on them. I keep my saddle-horses down in the front. But we'll take a walking tour and look at them all.

Simmons: Yeah, why don't we do that? I'd like to go in and see your horses. It seems like you're really the guy that likes horses the best. So we can take a walk and we'll have a look.

Latting: All right. Let's do that.

M1: Tape is rolling.

Simmons: Now we've moved down a little to another place in the pasture here, Mike. What are these horses that we're looking at right now?

Latting: These are my saddle horses. These are the horses that we use just for riding. We use them in the rodeo if we need to chase bulls out of the arena, if we need to move cattle around or if we need to gather the horses. These are the horses that we use for that.

Simmons: These horses that we're looking at—you said you use them for just general riding?

Latting: Uh-huh.

Simmons: Do you use them for what you'd call pleasure riding or mostly just in relationship to your business?

Latting: At my age, I do very little pleasure riding. I don't get up and down as well as I used to. But yeah. I mean, if we just want to go ride and saddle up one of these horses and go ride somewhere. A lot of the times when we're checking the colts or checking the bulls or something, we'll saddle up and ride out through it. It's good for the colts, too. It kind of helps them understand that this is part of life and this is what we do. So not only is it just pleasure riding or pasture riding, but it's also good for the young horses to let them know about life.

The thing that I really appreciate about these types of horses different than horses you see stalled up all the time: these horses understand how to navigate the terrain. They do that because that's where they live, and they may have to step over a tree or there may be something on the ground or something. If horses are standing in a box stall all the time, it's hard for them to really understand how to function. It would be like us staying in a closet all of our life and then they open up the door and put us in New York.

Simmons: I understand. You're saying that horses that live outside like your saddle horses have common sense.

Latting: Exactly right. They don't live outside all the time. I put them in the stalls to feed them. Then after we feed them, we kick them back out.

Simmons: Since you have these horses and they're a little different than your bucking horses, I presume that they've been trained for riding?

Latting: Right.

Simmons: What's the process about that and how did you go about doing that? Are you the one that trains the horses?

Latting: I've trained these horses here. First thing you do is get them used to the saddle. You get them to work; they don't want to kick at you. You know to keep your hands on them and you let them know that the horse and you are friends. First you start with putting a pad on them and let them know that that's not going to hurt them. Then after awhile you get the saddle on them. What I like to do is just saddle them and then just leave them in a small, round pen for awhile. Just put the saddle on them and just let them kind of get used to it and let them feel the stirrups flapping on their sides and stuff. Then I'll put a bridle on them and kind of get them used to having a bit in their mouth. About two or three days after that, then we just kind of get on them and just kind of ease them around and start riding.

Simmons: About what age do you start this training process with these saddle horses?

Latting: We try to saddle them as two-year-olds. We may get on them a few times as two-year-olds, but not a lot. When they're three-year-olds, then we kind of start riding them.

Simmons: It sounds to me like the training is pretty typical for both saddle horses except that your horses are going to have some specific jobs to do when there's a rodeo on.

Latting: Right.

Simmons: How does a young horse react to all that excitement and noise and the rodeo arena and the bulls?

Latting: usually my horses have grown up with it. So it's not really foreign to them. There are the bulls right twenty feet from where the horses are. They see them all the time. Once you drive

tractors through here a lot and start those semis up and stuff, there's plenty of noise around here. It's quiet now. But when we start moving or getting ready to go, it'll get a little noisy.

Simmons: OK. I notice behind you, Mike you've got some pretty large horse trailers there and it looks like even a semi. Do you transport your saddle horses along with the other stock when a rodeo is on?

Latting: I've got three trailers here. I've got a pot, which is a double-deck trailer. We put our cattle on that. I've got two thirty-two-foot goosenecks that we can put horses on. We have plenty of ways to haul livestock.

Simmons: You're a very experienced horseman and I have to ask you, Mike, I'm real curious: what do you do when you've got a young horse, especially, that doesn't want to load?

Latting: The best way to do it is you get them in a group. Horses are herd-bound.

Simmons: What's your secret?

Latting: I just put another one with them and just run that one first one on. The other one will just follow him up in there and before long they know it. Everybody's in the train and you close the door behind them.

Simmons: I see. You don't think you need to put the trailer out and feed them in the trailer and all those other solutions? Yours just go in like a herd?

Latting: Yeah.

Simmons: Great.

Latting: When they're babies, hauling them from pasture to pasture… A lot of times you can just pick them up, they're so small and they may be afraid to jump up. You just pick them up and set them in the trailer. Then you go to get them and they jump up in the trailer. My horses are loading all the time.

Simmons: So you don't have any around here that won't load.

Latting: No, no.

Simmons: Very good. OK, that's some great training. Down at the bottom of the pasture here, I notice a lot of your horses... of course, they come from some similar mothers. Breeding stock is pretty stable. You've got a couple down there: it looks like you've got a buckskin and maybe a gray and all. Do those come from your breeding program or are they different?

Latting: No. The saddle horses are horses that I've bought.

Simmons: OK.

Latting: The only horses that I breed... I guess I can say that in part. The ones that are in here are the ones that I've bought. But I've got some colts now that my son has started a breeding program for riding horses. I've got one that's not here right now; actually, he's in southern Indiana. I've got a young boy riding for me as a colt since school started back up and not really having time to ride him. My older son just got back from Spain so nobody's really been here to exercise those horses. His first colt is four years old and he's really doing well. Then he's got a couple of two-year-olds, I guess, that he's raising. The spotted horse in here is one of his colts.

Simmons: I see. It looks like you've got a paint out there. What's the genetic background on that horse? I know a lot of paints come from maybe some Spanish stock. What are yours?

Latting: Ours are registered quarter horses. All of our paints are registered. That's just like anything else. You can develop the color and get it into your breeding program; it's just like ordering a car or truck or something from...

Simmons: Yeah. You were probably very familiar with the old famous king's style quarter horse. I don't notice that so much in yours. Has that been something that you've wanted to encourage in your stock or avoid?

Latting: Not necessarily, because that was the stouter, thicker, shorter horses. They were great horses. But now you're wanting more with a little bit more gas—those horses that can run in fast and stop quick and maneuver quicker. I think it's just that the trend has changed a little bit. It may go back to that.

Simmons: Do you see more wear and tear on the joints and ligaments because these horses are a little lighter-built in the back end? Those king horses could turn on the hind and turn on the front quarter like nothing, but yet you're saying that there's a preference now towards the lighter horse. How does that affect their legs and joints?

Latting: I don't see any problems with it at all. You can breed for bigger bone; most of my horses are pretty big-boned because I need them to be strong. I haven't had a problem with horses' joints or legs or anything.

Simmons: You've been really lucky in that way.

Latting: Right. And selective.

Simmons: OK. You've also mentioned that the way you've got your land set up is largely for your convenience and also to benefit the health of your bulls, for example. Behind me, I notice that you've got some other animals out back. What kind of horses are they using those for?

Latting: My horses out back are my bucking horses that I use in the rodeo. The way I try to have it set up—it's important that one or two people can handle everything here at any time. So I try to have my water troughs close together; I try to have what I'm feeding set up so that I can just make a run and when I get to the end of that run, I'm done.

Simmons: So largely, that's for convenience and efficiency but I bet that probably saves you on fuel and other things.

Latting: Certainly. Right. The quicker you can shut that truck or tractor off, the better off you are. And make sure you've got everything fed the way they need to be fed.

Simmons: How about if we go down and you show me those bucking horses? We haven't looked at them.

Latting: Let's go. This first horse you see standing right here at the feed trough—he's kind of walking away from us right now—his name is Big Enough. He was the 1995 world champion bucking horse of the year. We're pretty proud of him. He was raised right here on the ranch.

Simmons: Mike, what did he do to obtain that title?

Latting: He was just an outstanding bucking horse. The top fifteen cowboys in the nation vote on who they think is the best horse and he happened to win. We've had quite a few champion bucking horses over the years.

Simmons: Would you say he's a champion because he bucks them off the quickest or the best, or how does that happen?

Latting: He bucks them off quick. Maybe not so quick all the time; it depends on the ability of the contestant. But he just has that much heart. He has that much stamina. He's just an outstanding horse. He's gotten to the days where I've pretty much retired him. I don't take him a whole lot anymore. But we've got some other horses in that pen that I'm really high on and are really outstanding horses. As a matter of fact, there are six or seven international finals rodeo horse qualifiers out in this pen of horses right here.

Simmons: Very impressive. Again, do you breed these? Or some of them, you breed? I notice there's some family resemblance.

Latting: All but three of these horses here were raised on this property. All but three. All but these three right here.

Simmons: The three in front of us?

Latting: Right.

Simmons: Oh, I see.

Latting: But all the rest of them were raised here.

Simmons: Right now it looks like you've brought them all forward right here. What do they eat? What do you feed them? Is it oats, or corn, or...?

Latting: It's oats and corn. It's kind of a mixed feed. Sweet feed.

Simmons: Do you make it yourself or do you buy it at a mill?

Latting: Oh, no, we buy it. We buy it, yeah.

Simmons: You buy it mixed already. Do you have any secrets or any nutrition tips that you use? Do you use any type of additives or vitamins?

Latting: I buy my grain from Donovan Elevator. There's a guy there at the elevator.

Simmons: Where is that located?

Latting: It's between here and Watseka. Vern is outstanding when it comes to concocting—putting the order together for grain. I get my bull feed from him and my horse feed. He's just a master at it. There are some things you don't learn at school. There are some things you're just born with. He's outstanding. The feed that I get down there at Donovan is outstanding.

Simmons: Do you use additives like lanolic(??) acid or anything like that for your stock?

Latting: To be honest with you, I don't know what he puts in it and I don't care what he puts in it. He's talked to me about the mix and everything before. It's proven to work extremely well for me. If he's got to change something every now and then, he says, "Mike, we're changing to this." I'll say, "Vern, just go ahead." Because he knows what he's doing. I have all the confidence in the world in him.

Simmons: That's great to have a feed guy you can trust like that.

Latting: Yes, yes.

Simmons: And your stock sure looks very healthy. I'm getting a closer look at them. These are all bucking horses, right?

Latting: That's correct—every one of them.

Simmons: Can you tell again, for the rodeo novice, exactly how you handle this? Where the horses are going in the rodeo and they're in the chute and then what happens? I mean, tell us the basic process of that.

Latting: You've got the chute. It's about three feet wide and it's about six or eight feet long. You put the horse in there and then they put either the saddle or the bucking rig on him—bareback rigging, they call it. Then the guy climbs in there and gets on the horse and he tells them to open the gate. The horse tries to throw them off and they try to ride him. It's about the secret to the whole deal.

Simmons: So very similar to with the bulls, then.

Latting: Exactly.

Simmons: They want to get you off their back.

Latting: That's right.

Simmons: When I've seen bucking horses, they look pretty fearsome. But these guys out here look pretty tame.

Latting: I don't know if tame is the word. Maybe content. They come up to eat and they're probably coming up to get a drink of water now. But we handle them every day. Every day we go through this same ritual. We call them up, we feed them and they're used to it. It's just something they're used to.

Simmons: They've got a pecking order, of course. So are they prone to as much bucking and biting…

Latting: Each other?

Simmons: …and kicking as any other herd?

Latting: When they first get started to eat, the first one's got to be first, we know that. This horse right here—the horse with the white legs and the white face right here—I own this horse's mother and grandmother. This is one of my third-generation horses right here. I'm really proud of him.

Simmons: Yeah. I can see there's that family resemblance going on there like you had with your horses down in some other parts of your place.

Latting: Mm-hmm.

Simmons: Mike, they just look pretty darn tame. That's all I can say. For bucking horses. What happens when you need to have routine vet care or the farrier? Do you do that work yourself or do you have somebody?

Latting: If a bucking horse's feet get long, we trim them ourselves. Any shots, we pretty much give them ourselves. If something major happens, we'll have the vet come down.

Simmons: I notice you've got some light-hoofed horses. Are they on the sandy soil? Are they prone to cracking?

Latting: If they get dry, yeah, but the lighter... (pause)

Simmons: Watch out there. If we get in this corner, you're liable to get ____(??) each other, and you'll get ___(??). Just don't get in the corner.

Latting: Usually if they've got lighter feet, supposedly they say they're not as strong. But what I've found is that, especially in this sand, this sand is like walking in carpet. It's the best thing for them. Their feet will get a little dry; a lot of times we'll let the water trough run over so it's kind of muddy so whenever they come up to drink it works out good for them.

Simmons: Obviously in this soil or sand, I guess you'd call it here, that's unique to Pembroke Township. We can kind of forget we're in Illinois. It looks like we're in Arizona.

Latting: Pretty much, yeah.

Simmons: However, you don't have any problems, I would imagine, with hoof rot or thrush or any of the other kinds of…

Latting: None whatsoever. It has its advantages and has its disadvantages. I would prefer to have, like, a third of this sand and the rest black dirt. It would help your grass grow a lot better. In the sand, usually what happens is when they grab the grass they just pull the roots out.

Simmons: OK. Ready?

Latting: One of the things I really appreciate about living in this area is that it's real sandy. I appreciate it a little and I don't appreciate it some. For my horses' feet, it works out real good. Actually, for my horse and my cattle and everybody's feet, it works out real good. Because I don't have to worry about the feet getting rotten or hurting their feet at all. But then sometimes it can get a little bit too dry. Then what we'll do then is we'll let the water troughs roll over a little bit so it's kind of muddy. They come up to drink all the time, they'll get their feet in the water, and it will kind of help to keep their feet from cracking so much.

You can grow grass on the sand here, actually. My front lawn is all sand. You put enough fertilizer on it and you can grow, I guess, grass on rocks if you want to. But I found out in the pastures that once the horses kind of get it down too far, which means you need to rotate it quite a bit. Once you get it down too far, it's really hard to bring it back. That's the down side of being in the sand. But I tell you what; I wouldn't trade the sand for anything in the world. It really works good for me here. It works good for my horses, for my cattle. When everybody else is walking around knee-deep in mud, it's usually pretty good around here.

Simmons: You'd say while some other farmers would look at this as maybe not so desirable for certain crops. For you, this is a big plus, on the whole.

Latting: That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

Simmons: Since you run a rodeo promotion operation, I notice that you've got, of course, a lot of animals out here. I'm wondering: when you take them to a rodeo, there are a lot of other animals around. Is there a system that you use to keep track of which animals are yours so that they all come home with you?

Latting: Certainly. First off, they're all branded. Every one of my bucking horses is all branded. They're branded with number IDs. The reason for that is that when the cowboys enter the rodeo, there has to be an animal drawn for them. The way you make sure that everything is on the up-and-up, because you can't really change brands… If Joe enters the rodeo and draws horse #31, then there's only one horse in that pen that has a 31 brand on them. Maybe somebody would say, "Well, I have the wrong horse." But you go by the branded number. That's why all of my horses are branded. Then they have my ranch brand on them too. You'll see an LRP on some of them on their left hip and on some of them you'll see an L with a backward R on it like on this horse right here. Those are the two brands that we have registered with the state.

Simmons: I see. So the state of Illinois has those registered as your brands for your farm?

Latting: That's correct. That's correct.

Simmons: That brings another question to mind, Mike. Since you do take your horses and your stock out to different rodeos and other locations, do you ship them with the other party taking responsibility or do you accompany the stock?

Latting: Oh, whenever they leave, I leave. The trailer they get in, I'm driving the truck that's pulling it.

Simmons: So you keep a close eye on things.

Latting: Oh, yeah. Right.

Simmons: That's your usual way?

Latting: Yep.

Simmons: Is that typical within the rodeo industry?

Latting: It depends. Everyplace we go, I go. So if I'm going to go, I've got to drive something. I usually take all the animals with me. I've got another guy who works for me—Ray Sekula(??). He does an outstanding job and he handles the setting up of all the equipment and stuff. Usually when I get there, since our arenas are all portable… In the Midwest you very seldom see permanent arenas, like you do down in Oklahoma and Texas. But he'll go ahead of us and get the arena set up. When I get there, all I have to do is back the semi up, drop the gate and unload.

Simmons: You provide that arena, the temporary fencing and all that as well?

Latting: That's correct, yes.

Simmons: If I called Mike Latting with the Pembroke Rodeo, you could set me up in a rodeo from A to Z. Is that what you're saying?

Latting: We have a turnkey operation; we can do everything that needs to be done in order for you to have a successful rodeo.

Simmons: When you started thirty years ago, were you just as complete as you are today…

Latting: Yes.

Simmons: …or have you kind of worked your way up to it?

Latting: Yes. No, we started out complete. Actually, I'm on the board for the International Professional Rodeo Association. We run pretty deep in the world of rodeo.

Simmons: Mike, this is a little off the subject, but tell me about that story that you told me a little bit back about how you were in a commercial for a rodeo ride? Let's hear that story.

Latting: The year after I retired from competing in bareback riding I was contacted by Colt .45. They needed somebody to do a commercial. They wanted a black guy that could ride bucking horses. I fit the bill there.

Simmons: (laughter)

Latting: They flew me out to Boulder, Colorado. We shot a commercial for Colt .45 with me on a bucking horse.

Simmons: I take it there's not as many Mike Lattings out there as there are some others.

Latting: There you go. There you go.

Simmons: You were in a Colt .45 commercial?

Latting: Colt .45.

Simmons: When did that commercial air? In 1976 and when?

Latting: No, it was '85.

Simmons: 1985? When was that, exactly?

Latting: That was the year that the Bears won the Super Bowl.

Simmons: Was it on during the Super Bowl?

Latting: It most certainly was on during the Super Bowl.

Simmons: Wow. Very interesting.

Latting: That's a long time ago, though.

Simmons: Yeah, I'll say. It's been a little bit of a while. Let's walk back on up out of here. These bucking horses are calmer but they're still a little wild. (pause) We've got done and survived looking at all those bucking horses back in there. Boy, they were bucking. Mike, I'm wondering what type of machinery or equipment is specific to your operation? You emphasize that you're running a ranch here; it's not a farm. What do you need for your business to fly?

Latting: it tickles me when people say "farm." I don't plant crops or anything. But I do need equipment. We've got a 100 Hydro that we use for hauling round bales or cleaning out pens and stuff like that. Then I've got two Dooleys(??). I've got a Dodge and a Ford Dooley. We've got two 32-foot gooseneck trailers here. I've got a semi that we haul the equipment with and then a semi that we haul the livestock with on a double-deck trailer.

Simmons: If your tractor breaks down or it needs to be overhauled, how does that affect your business on the short-term?

Latting: That's not a good thing. It's not a good thing on the short-term or the long-term. But on the short-term, I've got friends that have semis or something like that or tractors. If I'm down I'll borrow one of theirs; if they're down, they'll borrow one of mine. We kind of do things that way.

Simmons: Actually, this is kind of interesting compared to a farm where you're planting row crops because your technology in terms of tractor needs are a little bit lower than maybe some other farmers have. Because you ranch.

Latting: Yes. Quite a bit lower.

Simmons: Very interesting.

Latting: My planter doesn't have to work at all. (laughter)

Simmons: (laughter)

Latting: Actually, he can make me a flowerbed, actually.

Simmons: Very interesting. Well, let's move on a little bit. There are some common threads that are coming up through our conversation. I'm getting the idea that you clearly have been involved with horses all your life since you were a boy. You mentioned how your wife and your family were raised here on the farm place—that there wasn't any real shift for your children from going to town, for example, to a farm. It sounds to me like one of the things that's really important to you is this rural farm ranch life that you lead. I'd just like to ask you a question about this idea of people feeling that maybe the country is the best place to be and that maybe there are some real benefits to it. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on that.

Latting: Let me start off by saying this: I wasn't raised on a place like this. Up in Robbins there were concrete and regular streets as opposed to roads. I thought that was the way a person was supposed to live. When I went out to Wyoming to go to college, that was the day that my life started to be ruined. Then I got some really good friends who live in Nebraska. They have a big ranch up there in Nebraska and I spent a lot of time out there with Dave ____(??) and his family. You had to go through two ranches to get to his ranch—that's how much ground there was.

Simmons: That doesn't sound like being ruined, Mike. What do you mean by that? (laughter)

Latting: I'm going there. But anyway, when my dad bought his partner out in the rodeo business and I came out to help him run it, I realized after being out West that I could never live in town again. That's how the match between me and Hopkins Park came to exist. Leaving from Nebraska, Wyoming, Colorado, coming back east of the Mississippi, I knew there was no way I could have a neighbor right next door. I knew that I needed a place where my kids could just rip and run and all I had to worry about was them coming in and being filthy. I could just throw them in the bathtub and throw water on them and they'd be OK. That's the kind of lifestyle I wanted to lead and that's the kind of lifestyle I wanted for my children.

Simmons: That's what some people might call an agrarian lifestyle, and it sounds like it suits you very well.

Latting: I'm tickled to death with it and I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

Simmons: Very good. OK. I'd like to wrap up. I've got just a little bit more I want to talk to you about before we do that. One of the things I'm wondering about is the government. I know you're like every other American: you work hard and you pay your taxes. I'm wondering, in Pembroke Township, what do you get for that?

Latting: Let me tell you a little bit about me. I guess I've never asked anybody for anything and I've never had any subsidies or anything of that matter, either. So I can't speak for the rest of the

people in Pembroke Township; I can only speak for Mike Latting. But I work hard every day to have what I want. I make it my business to raise my family that way. What we have is what we can pay for and that's really all we need.

Simmons: Do you participate in any type of USDA or farm programs…

Latting: No, ma'am.

Simmons: …that are available to all ranchers and farmers in Illinois?

Latting: None whatsoever.

Simmons: So basically this is all your doing here. You just make your relationships with your suppliers and your family does the work and keeps the place running.

Latting: That's correct.

Simmons: Very, very interesting. Let me say one more thing. I'd like to ask you about the role of education in agriculture. We talked about that a little bit at the beginning of our talk this evening. I'm hoping you could talk a little more about your opinion: what role does education play in a successful career in agriculture? A lot of people feel like, "Oh, I'm going to be a farmer or I'm going to be a rancher. I don't need any education." What do you say to that?

Latting: I say that anybody that thinks as though they don't need any education obviously tells me how much education they need. What I mean by that is… The world is constantly changing and you've got to stay abreast or you're going to fall behind. I would rather stay abreast, thus being educated, understanding what's going on and learning the new things that's coming down the pipe because it's going to save me money or a headache later in life. Education comes in different ways. It's not necessarily just sitting in a classroom with an instructor giving you information. There are a lot of ways to be educated. But anybody who says education is not on their docket—there's something wrong with them.

Simmons: That's something that you'd be real concerned about, is maybe if there's something that prevents somebody from a successful career in agriculture.

Latting: I wouldn't be concerned about it: I would suggest that they be concerned about it because I believe in education. If they don't, then that's their problem.

Simmons: All right. That's very good. So to sum up, the most important things for you in your life have been... what, would you say? Education, of course. What are the other things?

Latting: The most important thing to me in my life is to be happy. I am the luckiest happiest person in the world. I believe that you're going to get out of life exactly what you put into it. I plan on putting a lot into it; thus I receive a lot out of it. I've got three great kids; I've got a good wife; I don't need anything else. I'm happy. I'm happy.

Simmons: Very good. It's been really great talking with you, Mike Latting. I've been really appreciating having you show us around your place today. We now know that you do have a ranch so I won't make that mistake and call it a farm again.

Latting: (laughter) Thank you.

Simmons: Thank you very much.

Latting: The pleasure is mine.

(end of interview)